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Revised biological opinion for Columbia, Lower Snake River dams issued today

Document responds to court concerns; finds proposed actions won't jeopardize salmon

SEATTLE, Wash. – The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) today released its final revised biological opinion on the operation of the federal hydroelectric dams on the Columbia and lower Snake rivers and most federal Columbia Basin irrigation projects, saying the new document goes beyond the legal requirements directed by a federal court last year to protect salmon and steelhead under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

"The revised biological opinion meets two important objectives," said Bob Lohn, regional administrator for NOAA Fisheries' Northwest region in Seattle. "First, it addresses the concerns of the federal District Court. Second, it updates actions taken under the opinion to ensure continued progress in protecting the ESA-listed stocks."

In addition to the biological opinion, a final document describing federal dam operators' proposed actions was released today. "Our updated proposal, along with other actions being taken in the Columbia River Basin, and our willingness to work with regional parties, demonstrate the federal commitment to salmon recovery," said Steve Wright, administrator of the Bonneville Power Administration.

In 2003, Judge James Redden of the U.S. District Court in Portland invalidated a prior NOAA Fisheries biological opinion and ordered revisions to base the analysis on measures that were certain to be carried out. In response, the federal agencies responsible for operation of the dams – the Bonneville Power Administration, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and Bureau of Reclamation – have focused their efforts where they will deliver the greatest biological benefits.

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"Since 2000, 11 of the 12 listed runs of salmon in the Columbia and Snake river basins have experienced significant improved numbers, and eight have had years that either doubled, tripled or quadrupled the 2000 returns," said Lohn. "The BiOp will help us build on these improvements because it defines commitments to improve riparian areas as well as boost fish passage and survival at the dams, with three- and six-year targets to measure success."

"These and other measures to operate the dams will not jeopardize the survival of protected stocks," Lohn added. "It is also more performance based and encourages the federal agencies to utilize the most successful means and updated science to boost fish passage and survival through the dams."

Devices to help juvenile salmon pass safely through spillways with more efficient use of water resources are examples of investments made to improve dams. Following a successful prototype installed in 2001 at Lower Granite Dam that allows 98 percent of young fish to survive passage, a new $20 million "fish slide" will be installed at Ice Harbor Dam on the Snake River next year. The new technology – engineers call it a spillway weir – has proven so successful that similar types of technology are planned for other Columbia and Snake river dams to provide faster, safer and more efficient passage for the juvenile salmon.

"With the installation of the new fish slide next spring, we'll be able to improve fish survival and use less water, thus saving Northwest ratepayers money," said Wright. "This is consistent with our goal of accomplishing our mission at the least possible cost."

The biological opinion addresses operation of dams and is just one tool in the effort to protect salmon and steelhead populations and allow for future recovery. Locally driven recovery plans for listed species will be developed in 2005 and 2006 and will describe numerous specific actions to improve the ecosystem for salmon. They will also estimate the time and expense to carry them out and identify how to monitor progress.

The federal agencies invest approximately $600 million each year to help fish runs in the Columbia Basin–and these funds have begun to produce real results. Nearly all salmon populations have increased greatly and current levels are now well above ten-year averages. For example, in 2003 alone, 19 streams and 12 rivers, totaling 436 miles, benefited from the funding of 33 projects to enhance the amount of water for fish.

The abundant runs in 2000 and subsequent years have made possible the first spring Chinook recreational fishery since 1977 and the first summer Chinook fishery since 1973. In addition, the administration has funded literally thousands of local, state and tribal salmon habitat restoration, protection and hatchery enhancement projects through Pacific Coastal Salmon Recovery Fund grants to the states of Washington, Oregon and Idaho and Columbia River tribes.

For more information on recovery planning, see the most recent Citizen Update and other information at www.salmonrecovery.gov.

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